

16th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Proverbs 1:20-33

*Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
'How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you.
Because I have called and you refused,
have stretched out my hand and no one heeded,
and because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when panic strikes you,
when panic strikes you like a storm,
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently, but will not find me.
Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
would have none of my counsel,
and despised all my reproof,
therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way
and be sated with their own devices.
For waywardness kills the simple,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;
but those who listen to me will be secure
and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.'*

Let me begin by confessing to you that it is more than a little awkward to be a 27 year old standing in front of a group of people, most of whom are several decades older than me, and to preach on the topic of wisdom. But I must also confess the universal truth that wisdom comes in many forms and not all of them are simple products of experience. In fact, some would say that wisdom is not necessarily the amount of knowledge you have but rather having an acute awareness of that which you do *not* know. I have known many wise older folks and many foolish children but I have also known many childish adults and many youngsters wise beyond their years. Wisdom is a asset both earned and received either by what we have done or by what we have learned by listening and questioning and (perhaps most importantly) being humble.

It has been said that only the curious have something to find. It is perhaps equally true that only the listeners have something to learn. The primary concern of this passage is listening and the primary character of this passage is a nameless woman who is the personification of wisdom. This is her first appearance in the wise poetry of the book of Proverbs and, simply put, it is her job to speak and it is our job to listen to her.

My old testament professor back in seminary was a brilliant catholic theologian by the name of Kathleen O'Connor and she divides this passage into three sections: the call to listen, the consequences of *not* listening, and the consequences of listening. Today, we will follow her proposed structure to explore this passage.

The Call to Listen (vv. 20-23)

First of all, this Wisdom Woman (as Kathleen calls her) has a powerful and non-compromising voice. She is not content to call out to us in the silence of our bedrooms or the reverence of our worship; rather, she cries out in the street, in the busiest corner, at the entrance of the city gates. In other words, Wisdom is crying out on the steps of the Shelter Island Police Department, the doorway of the Heights Post Office, and the ramp on the north and south ferries as people go to and from this busy little island.

As people go about their business, seemingly oblivious to her call, she wonders how long us simple ones will love being simple. She cries aloud, practically begging that people will listen to her call to listen. Her wisdom is both free and abundant: "I will pour out my thoughts to you," she says. "I will make my words known to you..."

Wisdom is the art of listening. Wisdom is the art of humility and knowing exactly what it is that you don't know. We all know that there is much truth to the adage "God gave us two ears and one mouth." However, nowadays what is even harder than mastering the art of listening is mastering the art of knowing what to listen *to*.

As Wisdom Woman cries out in front of Schmidt's, a man walks by checking the news on his iPhone about the latest loud thing Donald Trump is saying. The teenager passes by and sees another Shelter Island Reporter on the rack with another headline about how aircraft noise is the single, greatest evil to ever terrorize our island. Another person walks by and sees a bottle of scotch in the liquor store that is yelling out that the only way he will feel good about himself is if it is consumed. The overwhelmed mother of three sits on the bench checking her Facebook account to see yet another blog that promises "5 simple steps to a stress-free life."

We live in a very loud world. There is no shortage of voices proclaiming their own brand of wisdom and amidst them is *true wisdom* and she is crying out, being buried by the chaos. Therefore, the toughest thing can be this: how to we sort out *her* voice from among the others? Today's passage gives us a helpful tip for making such a choice. Wisdom Woman cries out: "how long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?" This interesting clue given from her wise mouth tells us that those who provide easy and simple answers to difficult and complex situations are often the fakers we should be most suspicious of.

And these voices are all around us.

How do we solve the problem of illegal immigration? *Easy, we'll build a big wall and make Mexico pay for it.*

How is the Lord calling you to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God? *Easy, by denying a marriage license.*

How do we get more youth and children back in our congregation? *Easy, we will just hire a young pastor and they'll come.*

How do we get back to the influence we had as a church 20 years ago. *Easy, do exactly what we did 20 years ago.*

I am reminded of one of my favorite lines in the Harry Potter movies when Professor Dumbledore says to Harry, "Soon we must face the choice between what is right and what is easy." *That's wisdom.*

Consequences of Not Listening (vv.24-31)

Now that Wisdom Woman has pled with us to listen to her wisdom, the focus of the text transitions to the consequences of *not* listening. She makes no apologies in the harsh tone of warning for those who have not heeded her call. "Because I have called and you refused...because you have ignored all my counsel...I will laugh at your calamity...I will mock when panic strikes...they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me."

Ouch. That's a wake up call if I ever heard one. I must confess to you that I know *exactly* how it feels to hear these words. I could write a book (several, actually, if I were to be quite honest) of times in my life *after* I have made terrible mistakes when the wisdom I have acquired because of such mistakes is really of little comfort in that moment when I'm asking myself, "why didn't I listen *before*?" I trust that I'm not the only one here who has familiarity with such circumstances.

This passage does a curious thing...it describes wisdom as a commodity that is stored up for the future time when it is truly needed. To use an analogy from our recent journey through the book of Genesis, Pharaoh was wise to heed Joseph's suggestion to store up food during the seven years of plenty to survive the seven years of want that were sure to follow. In other words, a wise person stores up wisdom even when that wisdom is not called for in the present. Wisdom is looking in the long-term and not just the short-term search for instant gratifications.

This passage from proverbs gives little comfort to those who do not heed the call to listen to a higher wisdom. This passage reminds us that there are real consequences to our lack of wisdom, to our lack of listening. In recent years, the important question has been raised of why, when compared to other developed countries, the United States of America has such a disproportionately high amount of mass shootings.

In the wake of the terrible massacre at Columbine back in the 90's, Michael Moore produced a documentary called "Bowling for Columbine." In it, he interviews the musician Marilyn Manson, whose death metal music has often been criticized for promoting violence and hatred. In the interview, Michael Moore asked a very interesting question and Marilyn Manson gave an even more interesting answer. Moore asked him what he would say if he had a chance to speak with the two young men who shot all those people and then turned the gun on themselves. Marilyn Manson paused for a minute and said, "I wouldn't say anything at all. I would listen to them; because, clearly, nobody else did."

That's wisdom. And it sometimes comes in unlikely places.

This is a tough passage with an uncompromising call to wisdom. Harsh are her words and it can be a tough pill to swallow. However, her call to wisdom is not without its promise for hope. The final transition of today's passage moves from the consequences of not listening to the consequences of listening to wisdom's call. "But those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster."

Wisdom Woman closes out this passage with an assurance that those who heed her call will have security, stability, and trust and will be free from dread when disaster approaches. We don't know how this is but it seems clear that her protection and guidance stands strong long after all other simplistic pep talks and loud shouting have faded and fallen.

Simply put, this proverbial passage reminds us that listening to one another is not only a way to gain wisdom but is an act of wisdom in and of itself. The act of listening to one another opens a space where really cool things can happen.

This week marked the inaugural episodes of Stephen Colbert's career as host of the Late Show on CBS. If you haven't had the chance, go back and watch the episodes and you will find a truly remarkable man. But one of the most remarkable parts of this first week of Stephen Colbert's Late Show is a portion that will never be aired but was nevertheless reported by many in the audience. A few days ago, Stephen Colbert had the CEO of Uber on the show. In case you don't know, Uber is a company that allows everyday people to make money by taking passengers with them in their cars and has received a lot of criticism in places like New York City and Paris where the taxi drivers feel it is hurting their business. During the interview, a protester in the audience stood up and interrupted their conversation yelling and asking why the Uber CEO was willing to place so many workers out of a job.

The audience froze. Everyone looked to Stephen Colbert to see how this new late night host would respond to this truly unscripted moment of tension. Would he tell the protestor to be quiet? Would he motion for the security guards to have him removed? Would he use his quick wit to make a joke and distract the audience from the protestor? Actually, he did none of the above. Instead, Stephen Colbert sat and listened attentively and respectfully to the person who had rudely interrupted the interview. After the protestor finished, Stephen Colbert addressed him directly and assured him that he would, in fact, be asking that question to the CEO of Uber. Rather than shutting him down, Stephen Colbert made the wise decision to add two more ears to the room instead of one more mouth. He listened, and then responded by acknowledging that he heard the man's concerns and promised to give voice to them in the interview.

Friends, *that's* not something you see everyday. *That's* wisdom. And, what's even more interesting, is that millions of people have taken notice of Colbert's reaction. People notice when other people and communities reflect wisdom in a loud world with loud voices and loud opinions. This passage reminds us that quiet wisdom is stronger than loud nonsense. When we listen to Wisdom's call, we open a space where she can truly bless us with her presence.

Let us welcome her together.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.